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AUTHOR McCormick, Christine; Mason, Jana
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ABSTRACT

Sixty-six children in three classrooms were tested at the end of their kindergarten year and again at the beginning of their first grade year to determine the effects of summer vacations on the gain or loss of beginning reading skills. The Letter and Word Reading Test, which was based on a developmental model of prereading and beginning reading, indicated that children progressed in their knowledge of how to read commensurate with their level of development. The results were interpreted to indicate that kindergarten children continued to progress in their knowledge about reading without formal instruction. (RL)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF READING

Reading Education Report No. 21

WHAT HAPPENS TO KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT READING AFTER A SUMMER VACATION?

Christine McCormick
Eastern Illinois Area of Special Education

Jana Mason
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

June 1981

University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, Illinois 61820

Bolt Beranek and Newman Inc.
50 Moulton Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02238

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What Happens to Kindergarten Children's Knowledge About Reading After a Summer Vacation?

What happens to young children's beginning reading skills over the summer months between kindergarten and first grade? While it is commonly believed that children lose skills or knowledge, evidence concerning the effect of summer vacation on beginning reading is not uniform. Rude (Note 1) examined the skills of children between kindergarten and first grade, using established reading skills tests, and concluded that visual discrimination skills increase over the summer while auditory discrimination skills minimally decrease. In a later study, Rude, Niquette, and Foxgrover (1975) found significant losses over the summer after first grade on both a norm-referenced and a criterion-referenced measure. Even so, this significant loss was accounted for by only about 15% of the children who moved from a "mastery" to "nonmastery" classification on the criterion-referenced measure. Perez (Note 2) studied post-summer changes for first through fifth graders and concluded that no significant loss in reading ability occurred over the summer.

To confirm our suspicion that teachers think that young children lose knowledge about reading over the summer, we interviewed 15 primary teachers in a small midwestern city. Fourteen agreed with the statement that most primary teachers believe that children lose reading skill over the summer. Further, half reported that most of all of the children they teach lose some reading skill over the summer; the remaining teachers reported that

a few of their students lose reading skill over the summer. None of the teachers reported that some or most of their students stay the same or increase in reading skill over the summer months. It is plausible to assume, then, that teachers do believe that children suffer a reading loss during summer vacations.

From observation of preschoolers' interest and skill in the printing and identification of letters and words, Mason (1980) developed a Letter and Word Reading Test (LWRT). Its purpose was to measure young children's beginning acquisition of reading, that is, of prereading concepts, utilizing a developmental model of prereading and beginning reading. Since the test was constructed as a predictive and diagnostic instrument (Mason & McCormick, 1979), it would be appropriate also to assess children's prereading and reading knowledge during the summer vacation between kindergarten and first grade. We thought the test particularly suited to the question of change in prereading because of its selection of test items from the beginning reading content domains of letters, common words from signs, labels, and primers, and letter sounds.

While we do not dispute that children might forget how to accomplish some school reading tasks, our purpose was to determine whether or not children's development of prereading continues without formal instruction. Since we believe that prereading and beginning reading skills not only are not lost but improve over the summer months between kindergarten and first grade, we expected to show that there is continuity in the development of prereading knowledge.

Model Used for Developing the LWRT

Mason (1980) proposed a developmental hierarchy of prereading which is based on the notion of change in understanding about what it means to read.[1] At first, children learn to recognize words that appear on traffic signs, package labels, billboard signs, etc. Reading at the first level is not unlike looking at pictures: It is context-specific and often unique to a particular location (Harste, Burke, & Woodward, Note 3). However, as children become better acquainted with alphabet books, see labels in different places, and have opportunities to print letters and label pictures, they realize that letter names provide a clue to spelling words and hearing sounds in words (e.g., Read, 1971). This causes a change in viewpoint and is the initiation of Level II. Children are now able to read and remember common words, to make reasonable guesses about how to spell short words, and to identify or sound out some of the consonants in unfamiliar words. However, they do not realize how variable letter sounds can be and may take an unacceptably inflexible attitude toward letter-sound relationships. Thus, a third level is needed which coincides with the typical definition of a reader (a child who can decode and understand a substantial number of common and uncommon words). Level III children realize that they must look beyond single letters, that predictability of letter-sounds frequently depends on attention to clusters of letters.

Method

Subjects were three classrooms of kindergarten children (N = 66) from an elementary school in a low-middle income area of a large city in Canada.

They were tested individually by an experimenter in April, a month before the end of kindergarten where a language experience approach to reading had been used by all teachers. Observation of the classrooms indicated that reading consisted of group recitation and location of words in sentences written principally by the teacher. Fifty-nine of the children were retested in the first week of school in September. Fifty of these children were also given a school-administered Gates-MacGinitie Test at the end of first grade. On the first two occasions they were individually tested over a three-day period. The Gates-MacGinitie Test was given in groups.

A Letter and Word Reading Test (LWRT) was the principal testing instrument given at the first and second testing period. It was comprised of six word and letter identification subtests ordered to reflect ease of response and to maintain children's interest (picture-word matching, spelling, letter naming, common word reading, consonant-sound identification, and vowel-sound identification).[2] See Appendix A for the LWRT.

Results

Contrary to popular folk wisdom, these children did not lose what they had begun to learn at home and in school because of a summer vacation. The test-retest results showed a score increase on every part of the test; further, nearly every child made a gain on more than one subtest. The average number of subtests on which children gained was 3.96. The three easiest subtests had a small score increase over the summer: uppercase

letter naming (93% correct in the spring and 97% on the fall retest), lowercase letter naming (87% to 92%), and spelling (81% to 88%). Three which were of moderate difficulty showed the greatest score gain over the summer: consonant-sound identification (59% to 74%, a gain of 15%), picture-word matching (69% to 77%, a gain of 8%), and word reading (26% to 42%, a gain of 16%). Vowel-sound identification changed very little: Vowel-consonant-silent e (VCe), consonant-vowel-vowel (CVV), CVVC, and Vre patterns scores changed from 12% correct in the spring to 17% after the summer vacation; the CVC short vowel pattern score improved from 40% to 48%. Overall, the scores of the easiest and most difficult subtests increased about 5% during the summer, while those of moderate difficulty increased about 15%. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

Standard deviations increased on two of the subtest scores. One, the common word reading subtest, had a greater dispersion on the second testing because some children made larger gains than did others. Thirty-two percent of the children made a 27-68% improvement on it over the summer; 47% made between a 1 and 26% improvement, and 21% showed no change or a very small decrease (1-4 points). Since three-quarters of this 21% had obtained a score of 0-15% on the subtest in the spring, it is apparent that the children who knew the least about reading common words at the end of the school year were also the least likely to learn more about them during the summer.

The second, the vowel-sound subtest, had greater variability over time because the highest-scoring children improved while the others remained at or near 0.

Stepwise multiple regression analyses indicated that Time 2 (September) predictions of achievement were better than Time 1 (April) predictions. Time 2 LWRT summary scores (sum of all subtest scores) were correlated .83 with the Gates-MacGinitie vocabulary score and .70 with the comprehension score. Two subtests, common-word reading and consonant-sound identification accounted for most of the predictive variance. Detailed information concerning this analysis as well as information concerning internal consistency, validity of the model, and stability are found in Mason and McCormick (1979). Scatterplots indicated an ordering of difficulty as predicted: letter naming < spelling = picture-word match < consonant sound identification < word reading = short-vowel sound identification < non-short vowel sound identification.

Accuracy of the model was assessed by grouping the 50 children into one of three levels based on five of the six tests,[3] using the following decision rules. Those children with letter name scores below 90% were considered to be at Level I. Children with scores above 90% on all tests but vowel sounds were considered to be at Level III. The remaining 38 children were considered to be at Level II. They had obtained scores of nearly 100% on the letter name tests and scores of 50% or better by Time 2 on spelling and consonant-sound identification. All the children fell

neatly into one of those three groups. Subtest means and standard deviations for each group are given in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Table 3 shows in another way the developmental nature of prereading in conjunction with the test results. Level I children were virtually the only ones in April not able to name letters and spell short words. Their improvement during the summer on these tasks but no others confirms the prediction that they were still acquiring information about how to differentiate letters and, to a lesser extent, how to use them to spell short words--knowledge which would eventually lead them to Level II. Level II children were at mastery in April on letter naming and spelling, making progress only on the middle-level tasks--consonant-sound knowledge and common words. Their change over the summer reveals that they were still acquiring information about consonant sounds and were learning to recognize some common words. Level III children acquired information about vowels during the summer. It can also be seen that Level I children were not yet proficient on any of the subtests, those at Level II were proficient at letter naming, and, by Time 2, spelling, and those at Level III were proficient at letter naming, spelling, consonant identification and, by Time 2, word reading. Thus, for each group the test has a hierarchical character.

Insert Table 3 about here.

Distinctions among the three levels of development can also be illustrated by describing the performance of individual children. We have selected six children, two from each level who typify performance at that level.

In the first example, a child at Level I could name only one of the 10 uppercase letters and one of 10 lowercase letters at the first testing in April. All her other subtest scores were 0. At the second testing in September this child named 4 of the uppercase letters and 4 of the lowercase letters. Additionally, she correctly placed 1 letter out of 11 from 4 words in the spelling test. Word recognition, consonant identification and vowel identification remained at 0. A second child at Level I named 4 uppercase letters and 5 lowercase letters and correctly placed 3 letters on the spelling subtest during the first testing. All other scores were 0. At the second testing she correctly named all 10 uppercase letters and 9 of the lowercase letters. The correct letter sound of 8 out of 32 consonants sounds was also given. Word recognition and vowel sounds remained at 0. The first child was at the lowest level (Level I) of the proposed hierarchy, while the second child was at Level I in April and was in transition to Level II by the second testing.

Of those children at Level II, one child at the first testing named the 10 uppercase letters and 9 of the lowercase letters, correctly placed 4 letters on the spelling test, read 1 word out of 28 on the word reading test, and identified 11 consonant sounds and 3 short vowels. At the second

testing he correctly named all 10 upper- and lowercase letters. Ten of 11 letters were correctly placed to spell 4 words, 4 words were read, 19 correct consonant sounds were given and no change appeared in vowel recognition. Another child at Level II in April named all 10 upper- and lowercase letters correctly, placed 5 letters of the words to be spelled, read no words, but produced 7 of the consonant sounds. At the second testing, she again correctly named all 10 letters; she spelled all 4 words correctly, read 3 words and identified 24 consonant sounds and 4 vowel sounds. For both of these children their principal change was in spelling and consonant sound identification with negligible change in word reading and vowel sounds.

One child at Level III responded correctly to the letter naming and spelling tasks at both testing times. At the first testing this child also read 17 words, and identified 3 vowels and 30 consonants. At the second testing she read all 28 words, correctly gave the sounds for all 32 consonants and identified 19 of 20 vowel sounds. Another child at Level III responded correctly to the letter naming and spelling subtests at both testings. From Time 1 to Time 2 her scores increased from 20 to 28 words read correctly, 29 to 31 consonant sounds accurately given and 9 to 17 vowel sounds identified.

Discussion

Gains by each group and by each individual within each group indicate that children continue to acquire knowledge about words and letters without

the aid of formal instruction. The pattern of improvement is consistent with the developmental hierarchy of awareness of print which was used to construct the test. Those children who perform least well improve most on the easier subtests; children who have already mastered the easier skills improve on the more advanced subtests. These results are interpreted to indicate that, with tests which are sensitive to levels of prereading knowledge and thus measure specific aspects of children's changing knowledge of reading, most children can be shown to make progress during a summer break between kindergarten and first grade. The results also suggest that teachers ought to have more positive expectations about what children know at the beginning of the school year. However, the results do not necessarily indicate that children continue to develop at the same rate once they are in first grade. Future research needs to study the effects of home activities and classroom instruction on children's rate of progress. This study points to the need for more information about how formal and informal instruction interfaces with children's developing knowledge about reading.

We are neither suggesting that the tasks we devised are the only ways to measure prerequisite reading skills nor that the concepts behind these skills are acquired without some assistance from parents and teachers. It is likely that the three kindergarten teachers involved in this study played an important role in fostering children's understanding of prereading concepts and that some parents helped to further their children's development. However, because the children learned about different aspects of

reading based on our test-score placement of them, it is apparent that there is greater continuity than has been believed and more independent progress by children than teachers expect. While an effect of instruction and coaching is not denied, neither should children's continuing acquisition of knowledge of print be ignored. Progress can be shown when the test items and method of analysis pull out and track differences in conceptual knowledge. Analysis by level of development will then indicate progress in prereading or beginning reading commensurate with children's understanding of print.

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Appendix A

Letter and Word Reading Test

Subtest 1

Picture-word identification testing procedure: Place a picture of the "3" word along with the four printed words or nonwords in front of the child, identify the picture, and ask which word goes with the picture. Circle the word the child points to. As noted below each word: score "3" for a correct response, "2" for a response of the word with only a wrong vowel, "1" for a response of the word that has the same initial letter, and "0" for a response of the word that is completely different or for no response.

STEP (2)	STOP (3)	BLAR (0)	SPAT (1)	_____
CUR (1)	BER (0)	COT (2)	CAT (3)	_____
EXAT (2)	EROL (1)	EXIT (3)	BLAD (0)	_____
TOSS (0)	MOLK (2)	MILK (3)	MART (1)	_____
MAN (3)	MIN (2)	SAD (0)	MIT (1)	_____
STAR (0)	BOOK (3)	BAIT (1)	BEEK (2)	_____
MEM (2)	TAP (0)	MAT (1)	MOM (3)	_____
DOG (3)	DAD (1)	CAN (0)	DIG (2)	_____
			TOTAL	_____

Subtest 2

Common word spelling. Testing procedure: Provide the following uppercase letters in front of the child. Use magnetic letters and a metal tray if possible. Ask the child to make the listed words. Check if correct. Write out child's incorrect response. Score by counting the number of letters child placed in the correct position of each word.

letters: T P C A O S K

Words to spell:

CAT	_____	_____
TOP	_____	_____
AT	_____	_____
POT	_____	_____
	TOTAL	_____

Subtest 3

Letter name identification. Testing procedure: Display each letter and ask the child to name the letter. Circle those letters the child could not name.

(total correct)

R P H R A D T M E B _____

b e m t d a f h p r _____

Subtest 4

Common word identification. Testing procedure: Ask the child to read aloud the real words. Indicate each error by marking an x next to words not correctly identified. Column one contains common, regular vowel words; column two contains common, irregular words.

and	_____	all	_____
but	_____	was	_____
go	_____	to	_____
did	_____	for	_____
got	_____	her	_____
fly	_____	two	_____
at	_____	or	_____
may	_____	saw	_____
use	_____	one	_____
say	_____	buy	_____
ask	_____	off	_____
ate	_____	are	_____
had	_____	put	_____
now	_____	you	_____
(total correct)	_____	(total correct)	_____

Subtest 5

Consonant identification. Testing procedure: Ask the child to read aloud the make-believe words. Indicate each inaccuracy by writing in the consonant substituted for the correct consonant sound. Ignore the vowel sound in this test. The first column contains consonants whose beginning name-sound describes the letter sound. The second column contains consonants which have several sounds or whose final name-sound describes the letter sound.

bak	_____	fac	_____
pav	_____	lam	_____
tab	_____	cas	_____
daz	_____	waf	_____
kaj	_____	yan	_____
jap	_____	sag	_____
zad	_____	nal	_____
vat	_____	haz	_____
(total correct)	_____	(total correct)	_____

Subtest 6

Vowel identification. Testing procedure: Ask the child to read aloud the make-believe words. Indicate an error by marking an x next to a word if the vowel sound is incorrect. Ignore the consonant pronunciation. The first column requires a short vowel sound, the second and third are long vowels, and the fourth is an "r" influenced vowel.

bek	_____	nabe	_____	vay	_____	kore	_____
bik	_____	nibe	_____	voy	_____	kere	_____
bak	_____	nube	_____	vee	_____	kire	_____
bok	_____	nebe	_____	vait	_____	kare	_____
buk	_____	nobe	_____	veat	_____	kure	_____
(total correct)	_____		_____		_____		_____

Footnotes

The research reported herein was supported in part by the National Institute of Education under Contract No. HEW-NIE-C-400-76-0116. We appreciate the help of our tester, Pamela Hall, and teachers and children from the Halifax, Nova Scotia School district.

[1]This hierarchy emphasizes the development of children's initial awareness of the relationship among print, meaning, and letter sounds. It is not intended to encompass all aspects of prereading understanding.

[2]The test, based on preschool children's progress in prereading, has since been modified to measure more effectively children's knowledge of common printed labels and vowel sounds. It was also expanded so as to assess a wider age range of children, including measures of children's ability to print, handle books, label book parts, and read simple stories.

[3]The picture-word test was deleted from this analysis because we did not feel that a multiple-choice format provided valid information. For example, during the testing it was noted that some children continually made a rightmost or leftmost response; others tried at first to figure out the correct word but them gave up and obviously began guessing.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Subtests

at Time 1 and Time 2

Subtests	Maximum Possible Score	Time 1		Time 2	
		$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
Picture-word match	8	5.50	1.75	6.18	1.56
Spelling	11	8.92	2.83	9.66	2.12
Total letters					
Uppercase letters	10	9.34	1.96	9.70	1.29
Lowercase letters	10	8.70	1.74	9.16	1.34
Word reading	28	7.28	5.55	11.68	8.00
Consonant-sound identification	32	18.76	10.36	23.52	8.49
Vowel-sound identification		3.84	3.42	4.92	4.53
Short vowels	5	2.00	1.53	2.42	1.55
Nonshort vowels	15	1.84	2.48	2.50	3.72

Table 2

Changes Over Time on LWRT for Children

at Different Levels of Development

Test	Level of Development					
	I		II		III	
	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD	$\bar{x}$	SD
Uppercase naming						
Time 1	5.33	3.72	9.89	.51	10.00	0.00
Time 2	7.66	3.27	9.97	.16	10.00	0.00
Lowercase naming						
Time 1	5.50	2.51	8.97	1.07	9.83	.41
Time 2	6.66	1.97	9.40	.83	10.00	0.00
Spelling						
Time 1	3.00	1.67	9.59	1.89	10.33	1.03
Time 2	6.00	3.58	10.00	1.28	11.00	0.00
Consonant identification						
Time 1	1.17	1.83	19.81	8.44	28.50	3.83
Time 2	3.83	4.31	25.02	4.89	31.33	.52
Word reading						
Time 1	.83	1.17	6.64	3.82	16.66	5.96
Time 2	1.00	1.10	11.00	5.68	26.00	1.90
Vowel identification						
Time 1	.16	.41	3.54	2.59	8.33	4.97
Time 2	.33	.82	4.32	3.02	12.83	5.56
Gates-MacGinitie Test						
Vocabulary	18.00	3.69	28.34	5.22	33.50	1.22
Comprehension	16.70	1.86	28.16	6.59	36.30	.52

Table 3

Average Percent Change on LWRT

Between the End of Kindergarten and Beginning of First Grade

Subtest	Level I Performers (n = 6)		Level II Performers (n = 38)		Level III Performers (n = 6)	
	Percent Change	Time 2 Percent	Percent Change	Time 2 Percent	Percent Change	Time 2 Percent
Level I Tests						
Uppercase letter naming	25	77	1	100	0	100
Lowercase letter naming	12	67	4	94	2	100
Level II Tests						
Spelling 2- or 3-letter words	28	55	4	91	6	100
Consonant-sound identification	8	12	16	78	10	98
Level III Tests						
Word reading (isolated words)	1	4	15	39	33	93
Vowel-sound identification	1	2	4	22	22	88

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